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Prisoners help the Prairie

Female inmates make historic-looking kids' costumes for gift shop at Conner Prairie

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A partnership between Conner Prairie Living History Museum and the Indiana Department of Correction is giving new meaning to the term "prison garb."

Female Rockville Correctional Facility inmates are making historic-looking costumes for the museum's gift shop.

Outfits for boys and girls -- complete with dresses, aprons and caps for girls, and shirts, vests, kerchiefs and straw hats for boys -- are being sold for \$60 each.

"The ladies that work on these garments are so proud of their work and being able to help do something for kids," said Ericka Mason, who oversees historic clothing and textiles at Conner Prairie. "It has really made a difference in how they feel about themselves and their lives."

Mason helped teach the inmates to sew the clothing, made from fabric that comes in historically accurate prints she chooses.

Conner Prairie officials say they have been trying to find a way to get 1830s-style costumes to sell since the early 1990s, partly because parents often ask for them when their children are encouraged to dress in costume for pioneer days at schools.

"We had a volunteer sewing guild make some in-house. We just could not keep up with the demand," said Elaine Molin, museum shop manager. "That's why I was looking for outside sources."

The solution to Molin's quandry came when Prison Enterprises Network -- a division within DOC where prisoners work -- contacted the museum, asking if inmates could produce printed products for Conner Prairie.

"I asked, 'do you happen to sew?' " said Molin.

The answer: Yes.

Prison Enterprises Network prisoners make a variety of items, including license plates. They earn about 35 cents an hour for their work. The money can either be saved or spent on commissary items, according to the DOC.

The partnership was announced publicly Tuesday at a news conference at Conner Prairie.

Eight of Conner Prairie's youngest historical interpreters also were on hand at the press conference to model the garb.

Elizabeth Nicholls, 11, a fifth-grader at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, said she likes to pretend, so she enjoys wearing the historical fashions and working at the museum.

"My uniform is really heavy," she said, adding "this is more light and breezy."